

Concerns heat up proposed solar projects

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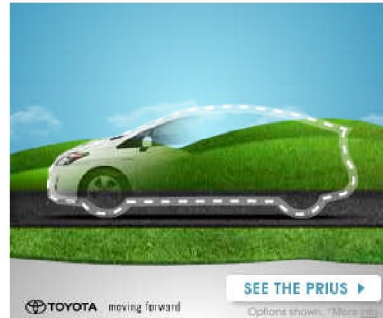
By RUTH HEIDE

ALAMOSA — An opportunity to economically benefit the San Luis Valley through one natural resource is raising concerns about another.

Depending on the type of solar process employed, proposed projects to turn the Valley's naturally sunny climate into power could potentially require significant amounts of another natural resource - water.

Those attending Tuesday's Rio Grande Water Conservation District (RGWCD) meeting in Alamosa discussed the potential water requirements for concentrated solar systems that would use steam to run turbines.

A 200-megawatt concentrated solar system would require 2,000 acre feet of water to operate, about 10 acre feet per megawatt output. "That's consumptive use," explained SLV Water



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B-031-001: Comment Noted (In Review)

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The Environmental Impact Statement is anticipated to be completed in late 2010 and will be available at <http://www.usda.gov/rus/water/ees/ea.htm>.

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Conservancy District Manager Mike Gibson.

RGWCD Attorney David Robbins compared that consumptive use to about 1,000 acres of irrigated cropland.

Gibson said one of the Xcel Energy staff who talked to him referred to a solar project elsewhere that had resulted in drying up agricultural land and inferred he did not want that to occur here.

"It has a very direct impact on agriculture," Robbins said. He added that in other parts of the state entire ditches have been bought up to supply water for power plants.

Gibson said, "This needs to be an ongoing dialogue. I think it affects all of us in the water community." He said it is not just a matter of a private landowner doing whatever he wants with his water right. "It's a bigger issue from a community standpoint."

RGWCD Manager Steve Vandiver said a number of solar energy companies are looking to the water district for support in finding water supplies. "Some are requiring a great deal of water, some minor amounts, depending on which process," he said. "Some of the installations need 12 acre feet to clean the mirrors and others are talking several thousand."

He added, "We are all committed to helping." However, the possibilities need to be reviewed thoughtfully and consistently, he said.

Gibson said, "We don't want to be in a position down the road where these companies say we did not go to the San Luis Valley because we could not get any water."

RGWCD Board President Ray Wright said one possibility for a water supply for solar is the Closed Basin Project but the water would have to be part of an exchange project that would put the same amount of water into the river that the Closed Basin Project would have deposited.

Wright added no one has come forward asking for Closed Basin Project water for solar operations, but the location of the project in proximity to

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some of the proposed solar installations and the consistency of the year-round Closed Basin water supply might make it attractive as a water source.

RGWC Board Member Greg Higel said he had received calls from senior water owners who were concerned that solar projects may go after their water.

Roy Smith, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, said that in addition to private lands, solar projects are being considered on federal land. He said those projects would require an environmental analysis that would include potential impacts to water.

U.S. Forest Service Supervisor Dan Dallas added that solar is not the only renewable energy source that might be considered in the Valley. "Right now we are starting to deal with a lot of biomass projects," he said.

Dallas said no one wants to stand in the way of renewable energy in the Valley, but the Valley needs to deal with this potential in a coordinated way. "It is really clear to me there's an overarching need for coordination here in the Valley because the interest is really high. We anticipate having numerous applications."

Senator Mike Bennet's Valley Aide Charlotte Bobicki said she saw the need to firm up the proposed Valley-wide power authority. Congressman John Salazar's Valley Aide Erin Minks added that having Hew Hallock as the governor's renewable energy representative in the Valley is another resource to help coordinate these efforts.

Minks also reminded the group that solar power could not grow substantially until a larger transmission system is constructed in the Valley.

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